

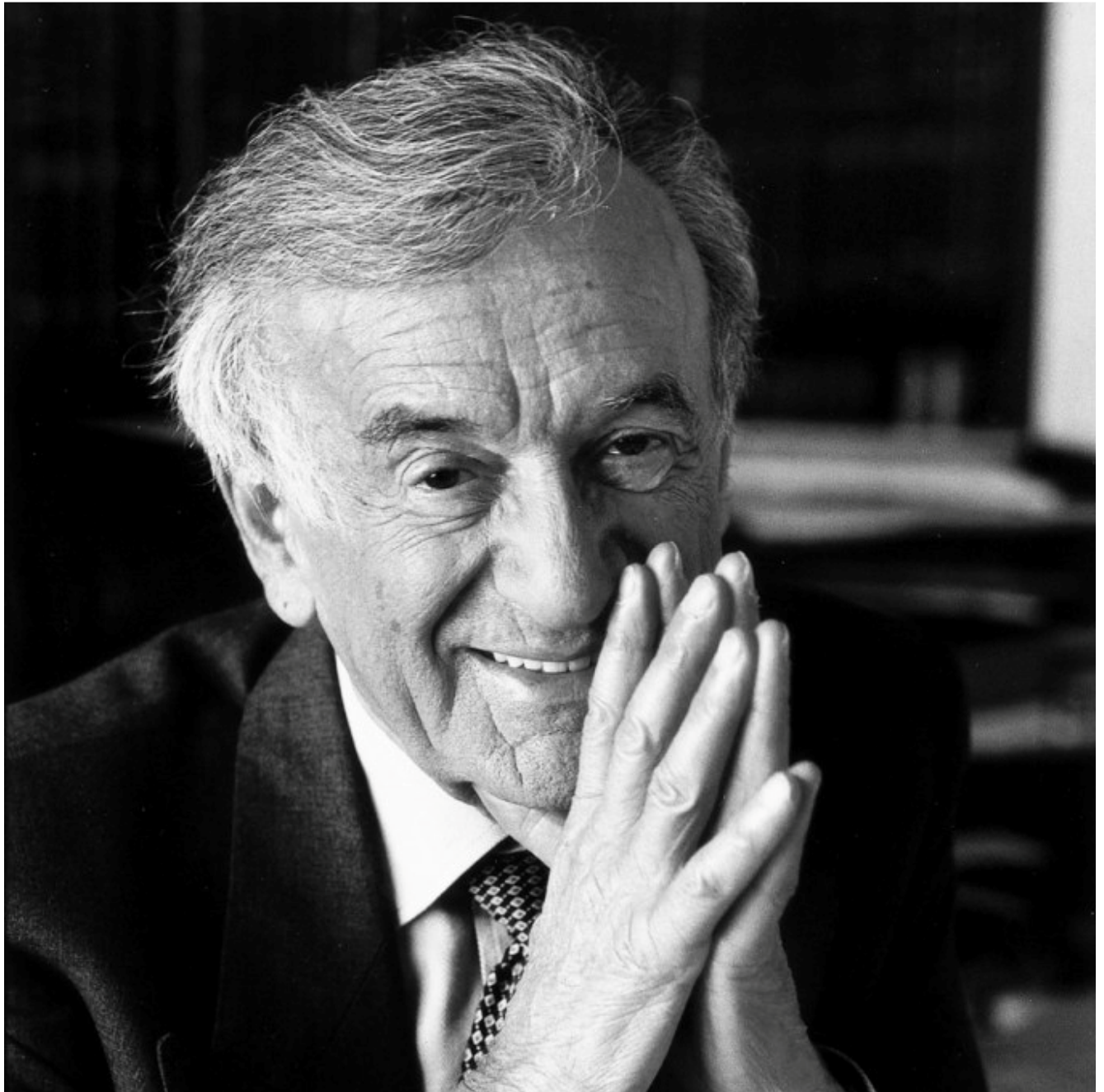
Elie Wiesel's Nobel Acceptance Speech

--by [Maria Popova](#), syndicated from [brainpickings.org](#), Jul 04, 2016

“We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

In 1986, at the age of fifty-eight, Romanian-born Jewish-American writer and political activist **Elie Wiesel** (September 30, 1928–July 2, 2016) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel committee called him a “messenger to mankind.” Wiesel lived up to that moniker with exquisite eloquence on December 10 that year — exactly ninety years after [Alfred Nobel](#) died — as he took the stage at Norway’s Oslo City Hall and delivered a spectacular speech on justice, oppression, and our individual responsibility in our shared freedom. The [address](#) was eventually included in *Elie Wiesel: Messenger for Peace*([public library](#)).

Three decades later, Wiesel’s words ring with discomfiting timeliness as we are jolted out of our generational hubris, out of the illusion of progress, forced to confront the contemporary realities of racism, torture, and other injustice against the human experience. But alongside the reminder of how tragically we have failed Wiesel’s vision is also the promise of possibility reminding us what soaring heights of the human spirit we are capable of reaching if we choose to feed not our lowest impulses but our most exalted. Above all, Wiesel issues an assurance that these choices are not grandiose and reserved for those in power but daily and deeply personal, found in the quality of intention with which we each live our lives.



With the hard-earned wisdom of his own experience as a Holocaust survivor, memorably recounted in his iconic memoir *Night*, Wiesel extols our duty to speak up against injustice even when the world retreats into the hideout of silence:

I remember: it happened yesterday or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the kingdom of night. I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.

I remember: he asked his father: “Can this be true?” This is the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?

And now the boy is turning to me: “Tell me,” he asks. “What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?”

And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.

And then I explained to him how naïve we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We *must* always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must — at that moment — become the center of the universe.

Wiesel reminds us that even politically momentous dissent always begins with a personal act — with a single voice refusing to be silenced:

There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victims of hunger, of racism, and political persecution, writers and poets, prisoners in so many lands governed by the Left and by the Right. Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free.

There is much to be done, there is much that can be done. One person, ... one person of integrity, can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

This is what I say to the young Jewish boy wondering what I have done with his years. It is in his name that I speak to you and that I express to you my deepest gratitude. No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.

Complement with Viktor Frankl on [the human search for meaning](#) and Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize herself five years later, on [freedom from fear](#), then revisit William Faulkner’s piercing Nobel Prize acceptance speech on [the role of the writer as a booster of the human heart](#), Albert Camus’s beautiful [letter of gratitude to his childhood teacher](#) upon receiving the coveted accolade, and the story of why Jean Paul Sartre became [the first person to decline the prestigious prize](#).

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